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Descriptions which have grown capital letters

BRIAN RABERN

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Abstract: Almost entirely ignored in the linguistic theorising on names and descriptions is a *hybrid* form of expression which, like definite descriptions, begin with ‘the’ but which, like proper names, are capitalised and seem to lack descriptive content. These are expressions such as the following, ‘the Holy Roman Empire’, ‘the Mississippi River’, or ‘the Space Needle’. Such *capitalised descriptions* are ubiquitous in natural language, but to which linguistic categories do they belong? Are they simply proper names? Or are they definite descriptions with unique orthography? Or are they something else entirely? This paper assesses two obvious assimilation strategies: (i) assimilation to proper names and (ii) assimilation to definite descriptions. It is argued that both of these strategies face major difficulties. The primary goal is to lay the groundwork for a linguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions. Yet, the hope is that clearing the ground on capitalised descriptions may reveal useful insights for the on-going research into the semantics and syntax of their lower-case or ‘the’-less relatives.

This agglomeration which was called and which still calls itself *the Holy Roman Empire* was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.
[Voltaire 1756, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*]

Research into the syntax and semantics of proper names and definite descriptions—and the linguistic relations between these types of expressions—has occupied much of the philosophy of language for at least a century. This literature has dealt with a wide range of questions, e.g. ‘How is the referent of a name or description determined?’, ‘What is the logical form of a name or description: are they referential devices, quantificational phrases, variables, or predicates?’, ‘What are the semantic contents of names and descriptions?’, ‘What do assertions involving names and descriptions communicate?’. Think of Frege’s ‘On sense and reference’ (Frege 1892), Russell’s ‘On denoting’ (Russell 1905), Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1980) and all the literature generated by these works, e.g. Strawson (1950), Donnellan (1966), Montague (1973), Evans (1979), Heim (1982), to name but a few. This literature is extensive and rich, full of interesting examples, philosophical insights, and technical innovations. Yet, almost entirely ignored in this vast literature is an apparent *hybrid* form of expression which, like definite descriptions, begin with ‘the’ but which, like proper names, are capitalised and seem to lack descriptive content. These are expressions such as the following:

Over a period of a few months Ian Nance and I constantly discussed the issues raised in this paper and I owe many of the insights herein to those fruitful conversations. An early version of this paper was presented at the 2012 APA in Seattle, and the paper has benefited from the perceptive commentary by James Shaw (and a subsequent correspondence). The paper has also greatly benefited from a discussion with Anders Schoubye, which inspired me to return to an abandoned draft of this paper. Thanks also to Daniel Nolan, Philip Atkins, Bryan Pickel, Dan Korman, David Chalmers, Leon Leontyev, Paolo Santorio, Dilip Ninan, John Cusbert, and various anonymous referees for providing helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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- the Holy Roman Empire
- the Round Table
- the Statue of Liberty
- the Great Emancipator
- the Grand Canyon
- the Salisbury Crags
- the Bronze Age
- the United Nations
- the Mississippi River
- the Outback
- the Man With No Name
- the Leaning Tower of Pisa
- the Oval Office
- the Golden Waterway
- the Angelic Doctor
- the Parthenon
- the Milky Way
- the Morning Star
- the Renaissance
- the South Pole
- the Bridge to Nowhere
- the Space Needle

These expressions—call them *descriptions which have grown capital letters* or *capitalised descriptions*, for short—are ubiquitous in natural language.¹ Obviously, proper names and definite descriptions each have a close kinship with this hybrid form of expression. So much so, in fact, that we might expect a comprehensive linguistic analysis of names and descriptions to provide a linguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions. That is, we might demand an answer to the following questions: to which syntactic and semantic categories do capitalised descriptions belong? Are they simply proper names but with vestigial articles? Or are they genuine definite noun phrases but with unique orthography? Or are they something else entirely? My aim in this paper is to address this neglected set of questions. My primary goal is to lay the groundwork for a linguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions. Yet, my hope is that clearing the ground on capitalised descriptions may reveal useful insights for the on-going research into the semantics and syntax of their lower-case or ‘the’-less relatives.

After outlining some of the key orthographic, syntactic, and semantic features of capitalised descriptions, I will go on to assess the two obvious assimilation strategies: (i) assimilation to proper names and (ii) assimilation to definite descriptions. I will argue that both of these strategies face major difficulties. Syntactically, capitalised descriptions act like definite descriptions, and thus are not syntactically simple, as the assimilation to names would seem to require. But semantically, capitalised descriptions act in a certain manner like proper names, and thus are not semantically descriptive, as the assimilation to descriptions would seem to require. Finally, I'll consider a promising proposal to accommodate both the syntactic complexity and the seemingly non-descriptional semantic behaviour of capitalised descriptions. This is the hypothesis that the capitalised nouns that constitute the restrictor are metalinguistic predicates. This final proposal dovetails nicely with the predicate view of proper names (e.g. Burge 1973). But the proposal thereby also inherits some of the most difficult problems with the metalinguistic analysis of names.

In the end, we are left with a puzzle concerning capitalised descriptions: it seems that neither an assimilation to names nor an assimilation to descriptions is tenable. In the absence of an adequate solution to this puzzle—and even in the

¹ One of the few mentions of this hybrid form of expression is found in Strawson: ‘An interesting intermediate position is occupied by *impure* proper names like “The Round Table”—substantial phrases which have grown capital letters’ (Strawson 1950, p. 338).

presence of certain ones—the traditional distinction between proper names and definite descriptions is under threat. The aim is to make a positive contribution to the literature on names and descriptions but I would not be overly disappointed, if one were to conclude the following: the traditional taxonomy whereby there is an important linguistic distinction between names and definite descriptions does not hold up to sustained scrutiny.

1. Capitalised Descriptions

Prima facie, capitalised descriptions appear to be definite descriptions where the restrictor phrase is capitalised, i.e. they seem to be expressions that are constituted by the definite article ‘the’ followed by a capitalised phrase containing some nouns, modifiers, and complements, etc. But depending on one’s view about these expressions, one will want to describe them in different ways, e.g. descriptions that have grown capitals, names with vestigial articles, fossilised descriptions, names beginning with the letters ‘t-h-e’, descriptions that have become identifying tags, impure names, partially descriptive names, etc. None of these are entirely neutral but ‘descriptions which have grown capitals’ has historical precedence (cf. Strawson 1950, p. 338) and it leaves open the possibility that when descriptions grow capitals they become proper names or become something else entirely. I will simply call them ‘capitalised descriptions’ for short but keep in mind that I do not make any substantial commitments by doing so.

We can give a very neutral (and therefore not very useful) characterisation of capitalised descriptions purely in terms of orthography as follows.

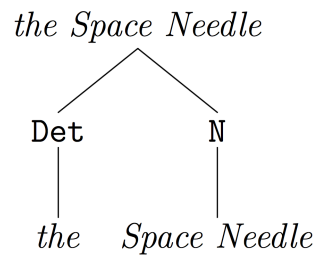
Orthographic characterisation: A *capitalised description* is a string of English surface structure of the form [the Φ] where the sub-string Φ is capitalised.²

Moving from surface features to syntactic features it seems that capitalised descriptions should be characterised as definite noun phrases (or determiner phrases). A common way that a string of English surface structure of the form [the Φ]—a ‘definite description’—is analysed in contemporary syntax theory is as a certain kind of noun phrase, namely a *definite noun phrase*: NP = [[Det] [N]].³ Accordingly, on a first pass, we might analyse a capitalised description, such as ‘the Space Needle’ as a definite noun phrase in the following manner:

² This characterisation may need some finessing, e.g. can there be capitalised descriptions that have a genitive construction (‘Harper’s Ferry’) or a possessive construction (‘Dead Man’s Curve’, ‘Her Majesty’, ‘Our Father’)? A further potential generalisation would be to cover cases from other languages (e.g. ‘Il Sacro Romano Impero’ in Italian or perhaps the Arabic name الله, i.e. ‘Allah’, which begins with the definite article الله, i.e. ‘Al’.) Also a certain form of apophysis might be thought to fall in the same class as capitalised descriptions, e.g. ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’.

³ That is assuming a standard constituent structure (or a phrase structure grammar) but similar points could be made assuming, for example, something along the lines of a categorial grammar—the purported analysis would seem to have analogs under a diverse range of approaches to syntactic theorising. And, of course, we could instead analyse definite descriptions as *determiner phrases*: DP = [[D] [NP]]. The differences here will not concern us.

Syntactic characterisation:



More interestingly capitalised descriptions appear to have some unique semantic (or pragmatic) properties. They seem to not be *semantically descriptive*, in the sense that, for example, the referent of ‘the Holy Roman Empire’ need not be an x such that x is *holy* and *Roman* and—at least according to Voltaire—an empire.⁴ For further examples, consider the following sentences.

- (1) The Giant’s Causeway is not a giant’s causeway.
- (2) The Hardest Logic Puzzle Ever is not the hardest logic puzzle ever.⁵
- (3) The Morning Star is not a star.
- (4) The Bridge to Nowhere is not a bridge to nowhere.

Of course, there are also many examples where the description associated with the capitalised description does apply to the entity it denotes, e.g. the Snowy Mountains are indeed snowy, the Round Table is round, the Galactic Centre is at the centre of our galaxy, the Mad Hatter is a mad hatter, etc. In such cases, *the So-And-So* is so-called precisely because it is so-and-so.

But here there is an important contrast with other definite descriptions. The inventor of bifocals is such that he could have failed to be an inventor. The following, however, is not possible: that the inventor of bifocals fail to be an

⁴ The Holy Roman Empire seems to have been an *empire*, at least throughout most of its history. And it was called ‘the Holy Roman Empire’ because of its association with its emperor, namely the Holy Roman Emperor. The Holy Roman Emperor was called ‘holy’ in part due to the coronation by the Pope and wasn’t called ‘Roman’ because he himself was Roman—the Roman Emperor needn’t be Roman just as the Australian Queen is not Australian. For these reasons Voltaire’s joke is not as straightforward as it may at first seem. (Thanks to Daniel Nolan for discussion here.) Nevertheless, I will often use the ‘the Holy Roman Emperor’ as a paradigmatic example of a capitalised description due to its familiarity. Other capitalised descriptions such as ‘the Space Needle’, ‘the Yellow River’, or ‘the Giant’s Causeway’ may, in the end, be better paradigms.

⁵ The *Puzzle of Enlightenment* is certainly harder: On your journey to the monastery you come upon a junction with three roads leading out, the left road, the middle road and the right road. There is a monk standing at the junction, who will truthfully answer any yes-no question, if he can do so without contradicting himself; otherwise he will immediately sit and meditate for eternity. The monk will only answer one question per traveller. What question shall you ask of the monk to find out which road is the monastery road?

inventor. This demonstrates the familiar distinction between a *de re* reading and a *de dicto* reading of a sentence such as ‘The inventor of bifocal could have failed to be an inventor’. Although the sentence has a true *de re* reading it does not have a true *de dicto* reading (where, if you like, the modal takes widest scope).

With capitalised descriptions, however, the situation is importantly different. While the following sentences unsurprisingly permit true *de re* readings, they also have true *de dicto* readings—in other words, given the relevant assumptions about the world, the following sentences do not have a false readings.

(5) The Snowy Mountains could have been snowless.

(6) The Yellow River could have been pink.

(7) The Outback could have been a completely developed urban area.

(8) The Round Table could have been square.⁶

In this way capitalised descriptions seem to have a certain semantic affinity with proper names. This non-descriptive feature of proper names was described by J.S. Mill as follows:

...a town may have been named Dartmouth because it is situated at the mouth of the Dart. But it is no part of the signification of the word... to be situated on the mouth of the Dart. If sand should choke up the mouth of the river or an earthquake change its course and remove it to a distance from the town, the name of the town would not necessarily be changed... Proper names are attached to the objects themselves and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object. (Mill 1843, p. 36)⁷

Theorists of a certain persuasion may wish to express this feature by saying that capitalised descriptions are *directly referential*, or that they are *rigid designators*, or that they have *singular content*, or that they are *Millian*—but these characterisations are all too theoretical at this point. I simply want to highlight

⁶ For example, during construction the table-maker could have failed to cut the corners off of the Round Table—it wouldn’t then have been called ‘the Round Table’ but it is arguable that such a table would have been the Round Table (since, e.g., it was constructed of same material by the same table-maker at the same time according to the same plans, etc.) and in this scenario *it* would have been square.

⁷ See also Russell 1910, p. 123: ‘Scott’ is merely a noise or shape conventionally used to designate a certain person; it gives us no information about that person, and has nothing that can be called meaning as opposed to denotation... But ‘the author of Waverley’ is not merely conventionally a name for Scott; the element of mere convention belongs here to the separate words ‘the’ and ‘author’ and ‘of’ and ‘Waverley’. Given what these words stand for, ‘the author of Waverley’ is no longer arbitrary... A man’s name is what he is called, but however much Scott had been called the author of Waverley, that would not have made him be the author; it was necessary for him actually to write Waverley, which was a fact having nothing to do with names.

this apparent semantic (or pragmatic feature), which any linguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions must incorporate.

Semantic/pragmatic characterisation: A capitalised description of the form [the Φ] may designate (or be used to refer) to x even if x is not ϕ .

These rough and ready characterisations are non-ideal in certain respects but since it is precisely the syntactic and semantic properties of capitalised descriptions that are at issue, we can't expect to do much better without sacrificing neutrality. At this point it should be fairly clear what group of prototypical expressions we mean to pick out by 'capitalised descriptions'. It is clear enough, at least, to begin a more detailed investigation into their linguistic properties.

2. Assimilation to Names

The most straightforward treatment of capitalised descriptions is to simply treat them as definite noun phrases that have certain unique orthographic properties in the writing system. Something like this view seems to be endorsed in the following quote from Sørensen 1958:

The fact that we use a capital letter when 'the channel' is short for 'the channel between England and France' does not affect the grammatical description of 'the Channel'. (Sørensen 1958, p. 168; qt. in Anderson 2003)

From the perspective of formal syntax and semantics this is to say that such expressions have no unique or interesting properties. But we've seen already that such expressions do exhibit some unexpected semantic characteristics. If Voltaire is right, then 'the Holy Roman Empire' can be used to say things about something that is neither holy, Roman, nor an empire—just as 'Dartmouth' might be used to say things about a city that is not on the mouth of the Dart.⁸ An utterance of 'the *such-and-such* is not a *such-and-such*' is only acceptable in certain very special contexts.⁹ For these reasons the assimilation of capitalised

⁸ In this regard it may be fruitful to consider Frege puzzles involving capitalised descriptions, e.g. 'The Bambino is the Sultan of Swat', 'The Bridge to Nowhere is the Gravina Island Bridge', and 'Ralph Waldo Emerson is the Sage of Concord'; and being overly loose with cross-linguistic issues the *locus classicus* of such puzzles might be understood to employ capitalised descriptions, viz. 'Der Morgenstern ist der Abendstern'.

⁹ A natural connection here that I won't explore is the idea that capitalised descriptions are referentially used definite descriptions (in the sense of Donnellan 1966), where perhaps capitalisation is used as the orthographic analog of a referential intention (e.g. 'The Man in the Corner Drinking a Martini' [referential use] is not drinking a martini). Adopting the distinction between speaker reference and semantic reference (Kripke 1977) would lead to the surprising result that capitalised descriptions often lack a genuine semantic reference. This view agrees with my negative thesis that capitalised descriptions are not proper names but differs with respect to my suggestion about how to account for the apparent non-descriptiveness of capitalised descriptions. I leave this line of thought to further investigation (but see footnote 24).

descriptions to commonplace definite noun phrases (i.e. definite descriptions) seems like a non-starter (but see §3).

In light of this, a very natural idea would be to assimilate capitalised descriptions to proper names. In fact, if there is any view that has the claim to being the orthodox view on capitalised descriptions, it is the view that they are proper names. For example, this seems to be Saul Kripke's position.

It should not be thought that every phrase of the form 'the x such that *Fx*' is always used in English as a description rather than a name. I guess everyone has heard about The Holy Roman Empire, which was neither holy, Roman, nor an empire. Today we have The United Nations. Here it would seem that since these things can be so-called even though they are not Holy Roman United Nations, these phrases should be regarded not as definite descriptions, but as names. (Kripke 1980, p. 26)

And it also seems to have been the view of Ruth Barcan Marcus.

... it often happens, in a growing, changing language, that a descriptive phrase comes to be used as a proper name—an identifying tag—and the descriptive meaning is lost or ignored. Sometimes we use certain devices such as capitalization and dropping the definite article, to indicate the change in use. 'The evening star' becomes 'Evening Star', 'the morning star' becomes 'Morning Star', and they may come to be used as names for the same thing. Singular descriptions such as 'the little corporal', 'the Prince of Denmark', 'the sage of Concord', or 'the great dissenter', are as we know often used as alternative proper names of Napoleon, Hamlet, Thoreau and Oliver Wendell Holmes. (Marcus 1961, p. 309)

But what does this orthodox view come to exactly? Given some standard assumptions, if descriptions which have grown capital letters are proper names, then they are not *descriptions* at all. The Marcus view can be read as providing a certain philological or etymological story about how capitalised descriptions have evolved into proper names, and perhaps as a story about the genesis of proper names themselves: Certain linguistic expressions started their lives as normal definite descriptions, but over time the definite description became conventionally associated with just one bearer and it lost its descriptive meaning—it became rigid—and this change in use was accompanied by a change in the orthographic representation of the expression—it became capitalised.¹⁰ (Eventually, perhaps the expression even goes on to grow out of its 'the' and become a *proper* proper name.)

According to this view capitalised descriptions have vestigial articles due to some historical contingencies concerning their evolution, but they are,

¹⁰ Various naming-taboo are often the impetuous for the development of new capitalised descriptions. For example, consider various names of God in Judaism (e.g. 'The Eternal One'), or alternative names of Chinese emperors (e.g. 'His Majesty the Emperor'). Also some cultures have a taboo against speaking the names of the dead (e.g. some aboriginal Australian cultures, some native Pacific Northwest cultures, among others). One can imagine how given that reference to the deceased could be achieved via a definite description that these descriptions might in time 'grow capitals' and—ironically—become alternative names of the deceased.

nevertheless, proper names.¹¹ The evolutionary story sounds plausible for certain cases. Be that as it may, here we are not primarily concerned with historical linguistics *per se*; instead we are primarily concerned with the claim that capitalised descriptions *are* proper names. On this point, Kripke says that they should be ‘regarded as names’ and Marcus says that they are ‘alternative proper names’.¹²

2.1 Syntactically Simple Names

A natural way to read the orthodox view is as the claim that capitalised descriptions fall into the same linguistic categories as proper names. Names are traditionally assumed to be syntactically simple and are analogised to the constants in first-order logic. Names such as ‘Theodore’ are usually thought to be syntactically simple singular terms like pronouns (e.g. ‘she’, or ‘I’). So it seems that a natural view would be that the string ‘the’ no more occurs in capitalised descriptions than it does in the name ‘Theodore’. That is, the ‘the’ in ‘The Holy Roman Empire’ is *accidental* in the sense of Quine 1953 (just as the string ‘cat’ occurs as an orthographic accident in ‘cattle’)—or at the very least the ‘the’ is expletive, or somehow not morphologically significant.

This view faces some serious obstacles. First we should notice that capitalised descriptions just like common definite descriptions allow for the interposition of adjectives in the following sense:

(9) the Space Needle \Rightarrow the **605-foot** Space Needle

(10) the Outback \Rightarrow the **desolate** Outback

¹¹ Such a position is echoed by Abbott (2002, pp. 193-194), who says ‘... sometimes proper names take the form of a definite description, or (primarily in other languages) occur with a definite article, as ‘The Round Table’, ‘die Jutta’... The first, exemplified by ‘The Round Table’, is one in which a definite description has ‘grown capital letters’, to use Strawson’s happy phrase... That is, the definite description has become a proper name, as signalled by the spelling convention associated with proper names... [In this case] the occurrence of the definite article preceded the metamorphosis into a proper name. Presumably that metamorphosis was not caused by the presence of the article (otherwise definite descriptions in general would occur capitalized), but rather by the prominence of the referent—its uniqueness and/or familiarity in a variety of discourse contexts’.

¹² See also Church (1956, p. 3), who classifies ‘Rembrandt’, ‘Caracas’, ‘Sirius’, ‘the Mississippi’, and ‘The Odyssey’ as ‘proper names which are arbitrarily assigned to denote in a certain way’ in contrast to ‘names having a structure that expresses some analysis of the way in which they denote’, e.g. ‘the author of Waverley’, ‘the cube of 2’. Although Church uses the old Fregean (but now non-standard) categorisation whereby both ‘Rembrandt’ and ‘the author of Waverley’ count as “eigennamen” or “proper names” (in the sense that they are both referring expressions), notice that he also distinguishes between those terms which are arbitrarily assigned a referent and those which have a complex linguistic structure—‘the Mississippi’ is classed with ‘Rembrandt’ not ‘the author of Waverley’. But he does caution as follows (Church 1956, p. 3): ‘The distinction is not always clear in the natural languages between the two kinds of proper names, those which are arbitrarily assigned to have a certain meaning...and those which have a linguistic structure of meaningful parts. E.g. “The Odyssey” has in the Greek a derivation from “Odysseus”, and it may be debated whether this etymology is a mere matter of past history or whether it is still to be considered in modern English that the name “The Odyssey” has a structure involving the name “Odysseus”.’

(11) the Holy Roman Empire \Rightarrow the **decadent** Holy Roman Empire

(12) the Mississippi River \Rightarrow the **mighty** Mississippi River¹³

Call this *the Problem of Interposed Adjectives*. This problem seems rule out the simple view that capitalised descriptions should be assimilated to the likes of 'Theodore'. We can't interpose an adjective into 'Theodore' to get 'The *mighty* odore'!¹⁴

Or can we? One might hope to find a way around this problem by appealing some form of tmesis or infixation phenomena, e.g. 'un-fucking-believable', 'a-whole-nother', or 'guaran-damn-tee' (McMillan 1980). Here we *can* infix meaningful syntax right in the middle of a proper name. For example, from 'Kathmandu' we can go to 'Kathman-fucking-du'—as in, 'I'm gonna get a one-way ticket to Kathman-*fucking*-du and never look back'. But the relationship between 'the Space Needle' and 'the 605-foot Space Needle' seems much more mundane than such infixation—it seems to be more or less the same as the relationship between 'the author of Waverley' and 'the *anonymous* author of Waverley'; or 'the inventor of bifocals' and 'the *ingenious* inventor of bifocals'; or 'my wife' and 'my *beautiful* wife'. Given this, an appeal to infixation, though initially tempting, doesn't seem very well motivated in this case.

But there are other options. And a certain similarity to the examples above highlights a distinctive feature of the interposed modifiers (e.g. 'mighty', 'decadent', 'ingenious') in these cases, namely they seem to have only an appositive (or nonrestrictive) effect, rather than a restrictive one.¹⁵

This is to say that it seems that 'the mighty Mississippi' means more-or-less the same thing as 'the Mississippi, which is mighty'—in contrast to 'the Mississippi that is mighty'. Given this one might insist that at the level of logical form 'the Mississippi' should still be treated as a syntactic (and semantic unit) in spite of the interposed adjectives in the surface structure. To motivate this consider the following example.

(14a) The 605 ft. Space Needle was built in 1962.

(14b) The Space Needle that is 605 ft. tall was built in 1962.

(14c) The Space Needle, which is 605 ft. tall, was built in 1962.

¹³ In Twain's (1883) memoir *Life on the Mississippi* he speaks of 'the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun' and 'the turbulent and blood-stained Mississippi'.

¹⁴ Paolo Santorio has called my attention to cases where expressions that appear to be capitalised descriptions don't seem to allow for interposing. Such cases come from what we might call 'titles', e.g. names of books, movies, plays, etc. Compare (i) to (ii).

(i) In the absurdist-tinged *The Stranger*, Camus examines the arbitrariness of justice.

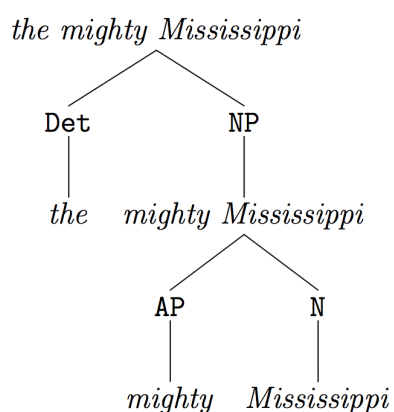
(ii) # In the absurdist-tinged *Stranger*, Camus examines the arbitrariness of justice.

¹⁵ I owe this observation to Anders Schoubye.

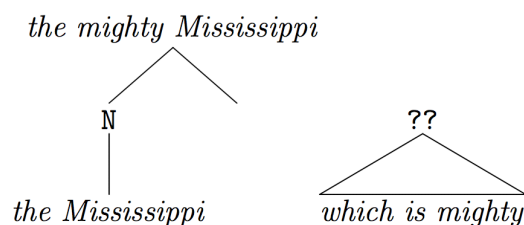
Here one can make that case that (14a) and (14b) have different truth-conditions—the latter requires that the Space Needle be 605 ft. tall, whereas the former doesn't (for further discussion of the truth conditions of sentences with appositives see Dever 2001, pp. 293-300).¹⁶ But without making a commitment on that issue one might insist that (14a) is a stylistic variant of (14c), where the adjective '605 ft. tall' occurs in a nonrestrictive relative clause. And given such an analysis in terms of nonrestrictive clauses one might appeal to a form of displaced syntactic structure to circumvent the Problem of Interposed Adjectives.

For example, Quine (1960, p. 110) insists that sentences like (14c) with nonrestrictive relative clauses are 'only stylistic variants of coordinate sentences' (cf. Dever 2001, p. 295-300 who treats sentences with appositives as syntactic trees with two roots). Whether we cash out the syntactic displacement of the nonrestrictive clause in terms of two distinct sentences or just in terms of movement of the adjective away from the capitalised description, the upshot would be that 'the mighty Mississippi' shouldn't be parsed as tree (A) but instead as a structure where 'the Mississippi' occupies its own terminal node (e.g. tree (B)).¹⁷

A.



B.



Such an analysis might seem plausible for nonrestrictive intersective modification—though non-intersective modification is another story. (Note also that there are cases of apparent restrictive modification as well, e.g. 'There are two Yellow rivers in the Mississippi river watershed. We live on the small Yellow river, not the big one.')

But even if an appeal to syntactic displacement (or infixation phenomena) can be used to blunt the Problem of Interposed Adjectives a deeper problem

¹⁶ The type of evidence Dever points to is sentences like 'Plato, the greatest metaphysician of antiquity, wrote the *Cratylus*', see also McCawley 1981 on the syntax of nonrestrictive relative clauses.

¹⁷ An interesting connection to the predicate views of names is how to treat modified proper names with nonrestrictive modifiers, e.g. 'the controversial Noam Chomsky' (or 'the famous detective Sherlock Holmes'). This is not syntactically on a par with 'the Noam Chomsky, who is controversial' (is it?) as the analysis above would have it. Of course, here there are similar cases with restrictive modifiers as well, e.g. 'the early Wittgenstein'. See Sloat (1969, pp. 27-29) and Matushansky (2008, pp. 604-605) for further discussion of (restrictive/nonrestrictive) modified proper names.

remains. If the ‘The’ in ‘The Holy Roman Empire’ were accidental like the ‘The’ in ‘Theodore’ or if ‘The Holy Roman Empire’ occupied a terminal node at logical form, then we wouldn’t expect ‘Holy Roman Empire’ to take other determiners. But, of course, it does.¹⁸

That is, the relevant capitalised nouns can take other determiners in addition to the definite article, e.g. ‘no’ and ‘a’ (and even ‘two’, ‘some’, etc.) (cf. Matushansky 2008, p. 579, who provides the examples ‘our ugly little Thames’ and ‘this beautiful Sudan of ours’).

(15) There was **no** Holy Roman Empire before Charlemagne.

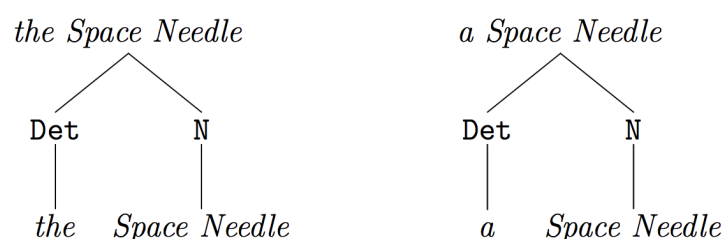
(16) Without the efforts of J. Edgar Hoover there wouldn't have been **a** Federal Bureau of Investigation.

(17) There are **two** Yellow rivers in the Mississippi river watershed.

(18) If not for private funding there might not have been **a** Space Needle.

Call this the Problem of Other Determiners. In this case neither an appeal to infixation nor syntactic displacement provides any resources to save the simple syntax view. One could make a desperate appeal to a widespread kind of homonymy such that e.g. the expression ‘Space Needle’ that occurs in ‘a Space Needle’ does not occur in ‘the Space Needle’, but we shall ignore this “lazy man’s approach”.

The evidence appears to conclusively establish that capitalised descriptions have a complex internal syntax. We’ve seen that capitalised descriptions seem to be syntactically structured just like definite noun phrases and that the restrictor clause can occur with other determiners to make up other noun phrases (e.g. indefinite noun phrases).¹⁹



¹⁸ I owe this observation to James Shaw, who called my attention to such examples in his commentary on an early version of this paper at the APA in Seattle.

¹⁹ In light of this ‘definite descriptions which have grown capital letters’ may be a bit of a misnomer, since there seem to be many indefinites with ‘grown capitals’ as well, e.g. ‘A Bridge to Nowhere’. (Note that there are many Bridges to Nowhere, there is an Alaskan Bridge to Nowhere, a Californian Bridge to Nowhere; and there are the infamous Glaswegian Bridges to Nowhere, among others.)

2.2 Syntactically Complex Names

What, then, remains of the view that capitalised descriptions are proper names? Might there be a more sophisticated assimilation of capitalised descriptions to proper names? Any such view must allow that some proper names have a complex internal syntax. To do so, however, threatens to undermine any principled distinction between *proper names* and *definite descriptions*. If ‘the Mississippi’ is treated as a definite noun phrase with a complex internal syntax and compositional semantics, what does the claim that ‘the Mississippi’ is a proper name come to?²⁰

In philosophical circles, where proper names are analogised to the constants of first-order logic, such a view of proper names would be very unorthodox. For example, Russell states,

The distinction between a name and all other symbols may be explained as follows: A name is a simple symbol whose meaning is something that can only occur as subject... And a ‘simple’ symbol is one which has no parts that are symbols. Thus ‘Scott’ is a simple symbol, because, though it has parts (namely, separate letters), these parts are not symbols. On the other hand, ‘the author of Waverley’ is not a simple symbol, because the separate words that compose the phrase are parts which are symbols. (Russell 1919, p. 173)

The supposed syntactic simplicity of names is often thought to be of great import and appealed to in support of their semantic simplicity, or in support of their status as genuine devices of reference (see, e.g., contemporary philosophers such as Neale 1993 or Salmon 1989).²¹

Yet, in linguistic circles the idea that proper names have a complex internal syntax is commonplace. According to this picture the category of ‘proper names’ manifest in a multitude of noun phrase grammatical forms. For example, in Huddleston (1984) we find a distinction between ‘proper nouns’ and ‘proper names’ (see pp. 229-231 and see also Payne and Huddleston 2002). A *proper noun* is a certain kind of syntactically simple expression of the class noun, whereas a *proper name* is a certain kind of (potentially) syntactically complex noun phrase. For example, the proper name ‘New Zealand’ is complex—its constituents are the adjective ‘new’ and the proper noun ‘Zealand’. So, on this view the expression ‘the Mississippi river’ is a proper name syntactically

²⁰ For example, assume that the semantic value of the determiner ‘the’ is type $((e,t),((e,t),t))$ and ‘Mississippi’ has a predicate value of type (e,t) such that the semantic type of ‘the Mississippi’ is $((e,t),t)$. In what theoretical sense is this a *proper name* as opposed to a definite description? Of course, there are views where proper names are also type $((e,t),t)$ (e.g. Montague 1973), but on many (if not most) philosophical views proper names are type e .

²¹ Salmon 1989 states that his central thesis is ‘that ordinary proper names, demonstratives, other single-word indexicals or pronouns (such as ‘he’), and other simple singular terms are, in a given possible context of use, Russellian “genuine names in the strict logical sense”’ (p. 211) and reveals that ‘it was [the argument by analogy to variables and pronouns] more than any other that actually convinced me of the highly contentious thesis that the information value of a proper name, or other closed simple singular term, is simply its referent and nothing more’ (p. 219, footnote 3).

composed of the determiner 'the', the proper noun 'Mississippi', and the common noun 'river'.

A first question to ask about this taxonomy is what distinguishes proper names from other definite noun phrases (if anything). Given the examples describe above it may seem that proper names are noun phrases that feature proper nouns as parts (and perhaps in some privileged syntactic position), whereas mere definite descriptions fail to contain a proper noun. But this is explicitly rejected by Huddleston 1984, who says '..."Central Station" is a proper name containing no proper noun at all' (p. 230)—notice that 'central' and 'station' are both common nouns. Presumably, then, the capitalised description 'the Golden Gate Bridge' is also a proper name containing no proper nouns (cf. Cumming 2013, §1).

In fact, the theorists that appeal to the proper name/proper noun distinction don't provide a sharp *syntactic* or *semantic* demarcation between noun phrases which are proper names and noun phrases which are not. Instead, what one finds is an appeal to extra-syntactic conventions of use. For example, Huddleston suggests the following.

What makes a proper name different from a (mere) description is the conventional association between the name and its bearer: in the central case names are institutionalised—for example, by some kind of registration. (Huddleston 1984, p. 230)

The Huddleston taxonomy is not attempting to carve the language at its syntactic joints—instead it simply aims to provide further classification of noun phrases by way of their pragmatic uses.²² If so, then the difference between proper nouns and common nouns is not a genuine *grammatical* distinction but is instead a pragmatic distinction—it concerns, e.g., to what different uses we put the univocal expression 'the golden gate bridge'.²³ This would be in line with Coates' (2006; 2009) position that *properhood* is a category of linguistic usage not a category of linguistic expressions, per se.

Properhood is something speakers do, not something that expressions have. Properhood is not a structural or quasi-lexical category... *The First World War* is in itself, as an expression and like all noun phrase expressions, neither common nor proper, but may be used to refer either semantically or onymically on a given occasion. (Coates 2009, p. 437-439)

Expressions such as *The Pope*, *The Sun*, *The Zodiac*, *The Milky Way*, *The Glorious Revolution*, *The Long Parliament*, and so forth..., are proper names just in case they are used to refer onymically, that is, with no

²² Huddleston (1984, p. 230) comes close to making a claim about the semantic (or pragmatic) differences between proper names and other determiner phrases when he says '...the fact that there are now two other universities in the state does not make the *University of Queensland* any less appropriate as a means of referring to it—precisely because it is the institutionalised name.'

²³ One might instead insist that there are homonyms here—distinct expression types with distinct semantic properties. Although the individuation of words is notoriously tricky, cf. Kaplan 1990.

appeal to any sense possessed by their constituents linked in a particular grammatical structure. (Coates 2006, p. 372)

On this view ‘the Golden Gate Bridge’ is *both* a proper name and not a proper name relative to different occasions of use (and depending on the particular intentions or commitments of the speaker). But as such it simply denies that the complex expressions ‘the Golden Gate Bridge’ and ‘the golden gate bridge’ differ with respect to their syntactic and semantic properties.²⁴ Coates can maintain that ‘the Golden Gate Bridge’ is a proper name (as used by a speaker at a time), but according to his view it is also true that ‘the inventor of bifocals’ is a proper name (as used by a speaker at a time). While I have no objection to Coates’ negative thesis that the category ‘proper name’ fails to carve a relevant distinction among linguistic expressions, the positive account of *properhood* is of no use to the theorist who wishes to assimilate capitalised descriptions to proper names, since the only sense in which capitalised descriptions are names also applies to run-of-the-mill definite descriptions.

Huddleston (1984) does not provide such a detailed account of properhood but as such the taxonomy is simply underdeveloped for our purposes. As stated it provides neither a syntactic nor a semantic distinction between names and definite descriptions—it appeals instead to the pragmatic or pre-semantic notion of a ‘conventional association’. One possible development of a view along these lines might go like this: Proper names are noun phrases, which bear a special conventional (or baptismal) relation to their bearer (cf. Kripke 1980). The special baptismal relation between proper names and their bearer accounts (somehow?) for their unique semantic properties. Capitalised descriptions, then, are syntactically complex proper names.

That is fine as far as it goes. But capitalised descriptions, qua complex noun phrases, presumably have a complex internal compositional semantics, and the view outlined thus far has given us no clue as to how that works. It is not enough to simply distance the view from the naive view that capitalised descriptions fit the mould of ‘Theodore’. We need a story about how the semantics of ‘the Mississippi’ relates to the semantics of ‘the mighty Mississippi’; and a story about how the semantics of ‘the Space Needle’ relates to the semantics of ‘a Space Needle’. How is it that the semantic values of these expressions are compositionally determined by the semantic values of their syntactic constituents?

Recall that the whole point of assimilating capitalised descriptions to proper names was to explain their apparent non-descriptiveness. The appeal to

²⁴ Coates’ notion of ‘onymic’ use versus ‘semantic’ use is reminiscent of Donnellan’s (1966) referential/attributive distinction (see footnote 9). But could an onymic use of ‘The First World War’ refer to, say, the Second World War, if a speaker so intended? Presumably not. Likewise, theorists who think the referential-attributive distinction is semantic maintain that the referent of a referential description must satisfy the restrictor (see, e.g., Reimer 1998). That is, when ‘The F’ is referential it can refer to *x* only if *x* is F—but the descriptive content of ‘the F’ is not part of the truth conditional content, only *x* is. Would Coates endorse such a constraint on onymic uses given that this effectively involves an ‘appeal to [...] sense possessed by their constituents’? Presumably not. But then in virtue of what do onymic uses of ‘The First World War’ only refer to the First World War? And in virtue of what do onymic uses of ‘the inventor of bifocals’ only refer to Franklin? Thanks to Anders Schoubye for discussion here.

conventional associations between the name and its bearer or ‘baptisms’ suggests the type of view where the semantic value of a name is simply its bearer (i.e. Millianism). If the semantic value of ‘the Mississippi River’ is a certain river, then how is the semantic value of ‘the mighty Mississippi’ compositionally determined by the semantic values of its syntactic constituents? It seems the only answer forthcoming is an undesirable appeal to ambiguity.

While a view along the lines of Huddleston (1984) or Coates (2009) can classify capitalised descriptions as ‘proper names’ and is equipped to confront the issues stemming from syntactic complexity, they are ill-equipped to make a principled linguistic distinction between proper names and other definite noun phrases (e.g. ‘the Golden Gate Bridge’ seems to behave semantically very differently than ‘the golden gate bridge’). A view that claims ‘the Space Needle’ is a “name” with complex internal syntax, has the burden of explaining how it is that these noun phrases have distinctive semantic features—in fact, this is the same burden had by a view that says ‘the Space Needle’ is not a name. Without such a story the view is no advance over the assimilation to definite descriptions—calling them ‘proper names’ is a label for the linguistic work to be done not the work itself.

But perhaps the work has already been done. Soames (2002) has explored some related issues that might be of help here. He introduces the idea of a ‘partially descriptive name’—these are names that are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions of a special sort. For example, Soames draws our attention to expressions like the following: ‘Professor Saul Kripke’, ‘Princess Diana’, ‘Miss Ruth Marcus’, ‘New York City’, ‘Mount Rainer’, and ‘Puget Sound’. On a first pass, it seems that whatever ‘Professor Kripke’ refers to it must be a professor, and whatever ‘Puget Sound’ refers to it must be a sound, etc. These cases support the idea that names can have a semantic value akin to a definite description, yet still be name-like in important respects.

What’s of interest for our purposes is that Soames also lists some capitalised descriptions in this connection, e.g. ‘the Columbia River’, ‘the Empire State Building’, ‘the Brooklyn Bridge’, ‘the Eiffel Tower’. Soames says these are also partially descriptive names, which he defines as follows.

A partially descriptive name n is semantically associated with both a descriptive property P_D and a referent o . The referent is o determined in part by having the property P_D and in part by the same nondescriptive mechanisms that determine the reference of ordinary nondescriptive names—for instance, by a historical chain of transmission leading back to o . The semantic content of n includes both o and D . The proposition expressed by a sentence $[n \text{ is } F]$ is the same as that expressed by the sentence $[[\text{the } x: D_x \ \& \ x=y] Fx]$ relative to an assignment of o to ‘ y ’. (Soames 2002, p. 110)

For example, Soames says that ‘the Mississippi River’ is a partially descriptive name, thus a sentence that it occurs in such as (19) will express the same proposition (have the same truth-conditions) as sentence (20), relative to an assignment of the referent of ‘the Mississippi River’ to ‘ y ’.

(19) The Mississippi River is big.

(20) [the $x: x = y$ & river(x)] big(x).

Unfortunately, Soames provides no comment on the syntax of such phrases, so it's not immediately clear that this view can accommodate the data concerning syntactic complexity. Yet it is compatible with the view—and seems reasonable given the semantic complexity—that 'The Mississippi River' is syntactically complex. If so, then this view looks promising in that it provides a view on which capitalised descriptions are syntactically and semantically complex yet name-like in they contribute a nondescriptive semantic element via a free variable.

But on closer inspection this partially descriptive view provides little of the details we desire; and given the problems outlined below it seems unlikely that such details could be fleshed out in an adequate way. First notice that the analysis does not fare so well with some of our key examples:

- [the Holy Roman Empire] = [the $x: x = y$ & empire(x)]
- [the Space Needle] = [the $x: x = y$ & needle(x)]
- [the Morning Star] = [the $x: x = y$ & star(x)]
- [the Leaning Tower of Pisa] = [the $x: x = y$ & leaning(x) & tower(x)]
- [the Outback] = [the $x: x = y$ & (?)]
- [the Renaissance] = [the $x: x = y$ & (?)]

There are things Soames could say about each case. One might insist that the Holy Roman Empire was indeed an *empire* contrary to Voltaire's quote (see footnote 4). With examples like 'the Space Needle' one might insist that it is actually a reduced form of 'the Space Needle Tower', similar to the reduced form 'the Mississippi'. This only goes so far, however, since it seems implausible that 'the Morning Star' is a reduced form of 'the Morning Star Planet'. And it'd be quite desperate to insist on expanded forms such as 'the Renaissance Cultural Movement' and the 'the Outback Area'. Of course, one could insist that examples like 'the Renaissance' or 'the Morning Star' are just normal proper names (i.e. not partially descriptive names) and so don't get such an analysis. But then we are back to square one.

Let's set this type of problem aside and assume that one could deal with all such cases (perhaps the Space Needle and the Big Apple are *needles* and *apples*, respectively, in some extended sense). More substantial problems remain, however. Presumably the analysis in terms of partially descriptive names could handle interposed adjectives. It seems that, following the analysis above, one could analyse 'the mighty Mississippi River' as [the $x: \text{mighty}(x)$ & $x=y$ & river(x)].²⁵

But what about cases that involve other determiners (e.g. 'a Space Needle' or 'all Yellow Rivers')? Here the theory of partially descriptive names just falls silent, since the expressions 'a Space Needle' and 'all Yellow Rivers' are not, I take it, partially descriptive names. But the problem is that there doesn't seem to be a straightforward way to supplement the story to handle such cases in a uniform and principled manner. Or to put the worry in a simple minded way: It is not just

²⁵ Would Soames also want to treat modified proper names as partial descriptive names, e.g. 'the tall Alfred' or 'the Alfred in my class'?

a matter of switching the determiner from, e.g. 'the x ' to ' $\forall x$ ' to get [$\forall x: x=y \ \& \ \text{river}(x)$] (where ' y ' is assigned a certain river)—this is a decidedly implausible analysis of 'all Yellow Rivers'. Admittedly, the view is not put forward to treat such cases, but given the close syntactic and semantic relationship between definite noun phrases and indefinite noun phrases, it is awkward, to say the least, that Soames provides a semantic analysis of 'the Yellow River', which has no discernible relation to the semantics of 'a Yellow River'.

This points to the key problem with Soames' proposal, in so far as it is construed as a theory of capitalised descriptions. It tells us what the semantic value of 'the Mississippi River' is but it doesn't tell us how the semantic value of 'the Mississippi River' is determined by the semantic values of 'the', 'Mississippi', and 'River'. The view only tells us the truth-conditions of sentences containing capitalised descriptions.

Notice how underdeveloped the semantic story is. It tells us that 'the Mississippi River' is equivalent to a restricted definite description [$\text{the } x: x=y \ \& \ \text{river}(x)$] with a free variable ' y ' that is assigned Old Man River by fiat; and it tells us that 'the Columbia River' is likewise equivalent to [$\text{the } x: x=y \ \& \ \text{river}(x)$] but with the free variable ' y ' assigned instead to what natives of the Pacific Northwest called 'the big river'. Is this difference in the value of the free variable a product of the different semantic contributions made by 'Mississippi' and 'Columbia'? Soames says that the referent of a partially descriptive name is determined in part by having a certain descriptive property (e.g. being a river) and in part by a nondescriptive mechanism such as a historical chain of transmission (e.g. leading back to the baptism "We shall call thee Mississippi!"). But it is just not clear how this *metasemantic* claim can be translated into a story concerning the compositional semantics—especially a story that could accommodate both definite and indefinite determiners.

Let's in any case be overly charitable and imagine such a story were provided, i.e. a theory such that (i) 'the Yellow River' is syntactically complex and its meaning is compositionally determined by the semantic values of its syntactic parts, (ii) in a way such that it is rigid (or nondescriptive in the relevant way), and (iii) the story is able to naturally accommodate expressions such as 'the lower Yellow River' and 'a Yellow River' in adequate way. In what sense would this be a vindication of the assimilation of capitalised descriptions to *proper names*?

Here the debate threatens to become a mere terminological dispute. But I'd insist that historically speaking the terminology goes decidedly against the 'names' view. The historical distinction between proper names and other denoting expressions has it that names are in some sense *linguistically simple* whereas definite descriptions are *linguistically complex*.²⁶ And we've seen ample

²⁶ To bolster the historical claim we could look to Russell (1919), who makes the distinction between simple symbols which directly designate versus expressions which consist of several words whose meanings when combined result in the meaning of the complex expression. Or Church (1956) who makes the distinction between terms that are arbitrarily assigned a referent versus those that have a complex linguistic structure. Similar distinctions are found throughout much of twentieth century philosophy of language. (Interestingly, Kripke 1980 simply stipulates 'We will use the term "name" so it does *not* include definite descriptions... but only those things that which in ordinary language would be called "proper names"'. This is of little help because capitalised descriptions are definite descriptions that are also ordinary called 'proper names'.)

evidence that capitalised descriptions fall into the latter category. Given this it'd be difficult to defend the idea that capitalised descriptions fall on the 'proper names' side of the historical distinction.

In general, any view that attempts to assimilate capitalised descriptions to proper names by expanding the class of proper names to include syntactically and semantically complex phrases, will have trouble drawing clear distinctions between proper names and definite descriptions. If one insists that there is no such distinction, I'm sympathetic, but I wouldn't consider such a view a genuine assimilation of capitalised descriptions to proper names. In the absence of a clear theoretical distinction, calling capitalised descriptions 'proper names' is a mere terminological victory.

3. Assimilation to Definite Descriptions

I think we should take the syntactic data at face-value—capitalised descriptions are definite descriptions. This view, however, seemed to be a non-starter due to the apparent semantic properties of capitalised descriptions, e.g. 'The Morning Star is not a star'. How shall we proceed? We can gain some insight by considering the following sentence (inspired by Boër 1975).

(13) In a hotel, the thirteenth floor is considered unlucky.

Is this sentence true or false? Assuming that 'the thirteenth floor' refers to the floor that is thirteen floors above the ground, the sentence seems false. The thirteenth floor of a building is often called '14' (or '12B' or 'M') and is not thought to be unlucky—precisely because it is so-called. But sentence (13) has a natural reading on which it seems true. On this reading, the definite description is understood to have 'grown capitals'.

(13*) In a hotel, the Thirteenth Floor is considered unlucky.

The floor that bears the name 'Thirteenth Floor' is considered unlucky, but the floor that is merely thirteen floors from the ground is not. Here it seems that in (13*) 'Thirteenth Floor' is a metalinguistic predicate that expresses something like the property of *bearing the label 'Thirteenth Floor'*—a property that is considered unlucky.

Perhaps this is what we should say about capitalised descriptions in general: they are definite noun phrases syntactically constituted by nouns for metalinguistic kinds. The expression 'the Holy Roman Empire' is a definite description that refers to the *x* such that *x* bears the name 'Holy Roman Empire'. On this understanding the Holy Roman Empire needn't be holy, Roman, nor an empire, but it must be a *Holy Roman Empire*—it must bear 'Holy Roman Empire'. Compare this to the fact that a bearer of the name 'Tiger Smith' need not be a tiger nor a smith but such a bearer will be a Tiger Smith. This proposal promises to explain the apparent semantic non-descriptiveness of capitalised descriptions, while accommodating the syntactic issues concerning interposed adjectives and other determiners.

First consider syntactic complexity. On the current proposal capitalised descriptions are just definite descriptions, so there is no special syntactic or semantic problem for the interposing of various modifiers and adjectives into them—at least no problems beyond the standard issues concerning the internal compositional semantics of noun phrases. And given that, e.g., ‘the Space Needle’ is a definite description, it’s straightforward to analyse cases with other determiners, e.g. ‘a Space Needle’ as an indefinite where to be a Space Needle something must be bearer of ‘Space Needle’.

But the main problem was nondescriptionality. By appeal to metalinguistic predicates (e.g. ‘Golden Gate’) the proposal can make some advance over the analysis in terms of ordinary predicates (e.g. ‘golden gate’). The apparent semantic nondescriptionality of capitalised descriptions might be explained by appeal to homonymy (or what has been called ‘capitonymy’): we must distinguish the metalinguistic predicate ‘Morning Star’ from the homonymous non-metalinguistic predicate ‘morning star’. The Morning Star needn’t fall under the latter but it must fall under the former. But here too there are serious problems. Let’s discuss them in order of increasing seriousness.

Problem 1. In an expression such as ‘the Mississippi River’ does ‘river’ express the property of being a large natural waterway or does it express the metalinguistic property of being a bearer of ‘River’? Carroll (1985) claims that, for example, the Willis Avenue Bridge must be a *bridge*, i.e. it must be a road structure that spans a physical obstacle—a data point Soames 2002 tries to accommodate with his analysis in terms of partially descriptive names. So, in such examples ‘Bridge’ and ‘River’ do not seem to express metalinguistic kinds. But in earlier examples we saw, e.g., that the Morning Star is not a star, the Space Needle is not a needle, the Big Apple is not an apple, and the Holy Roman Empire was supposedly not an empire.

One might think that what is going on here is the type of homonymy appealed to above. Sometimes the classifiers, such as ‘river’, ‘sea’, and ‘empire’ are metalinguistic predicates but in many (most?) cases they are not. To keep the cases distinct it’d be appropriate to capitalise only when the noun expresses a metalinguistic kind, e.g. ‘the North star’ versus ‘the Morning Star’, but, of course, we do not follow such a regimented practice. It may even be that we use both ‘the Mississippi River’ and ‘the Mississippi river’ where the former ‘river’ expresses a property for a metalinguistic kind and the latter expresses a property for a waterway kind. If so, this would provide some headway on a puzzle presented in Cumming 2009.

The puzzle for the compositional analysis can be posed thus: the Yellow River (qua river-name) must denote a river. Yet one can speak of there being two Yellow Rivers, one of them a waterway and the other a concerto. Where does the restriction to rivers come from in the first case, if absent from the second? (Cumming 2009, p. 23)

It is plausible that here there is a slide between ‘the Yellow river’, which must denote a river and ‘the Yellow River’ which, in fact, denotes the same river (in the right context) and denotes a concerto (in a different context).

Further evidence on the syntactic and semantic status of the classifiers is gained by considering cases involving coordination. The following sound fine, suggesting that both 'bridges' and 'empires' have their standard (non-metalinguistic) meaning.

(21) They're doing construction on the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges.

(22) The Holy Roman and British Empires hunted heretics.

And consideration of cases involving pro-forms provides more evidence.²⁷

(23) When the south bridge is blocked use the north one.

(24) When the Brooklyn Bridge is blocked use the Manhattan one.

One could use such tests to determine whether the classifier noun is part of the metalinguistic predicate or not.

(25) # We saw the North Star before we saw the Morning one.

(26) # The pianists played the Yellow River while crossing the Mississippi one.

(27) # We were looking for a sewing needle but only found the Space one.

To make good on the proposal the metalinguistic analysis must sort out these issues about the classifiers (e.g. 'bridge', 'empire', 'star', etc.). This has not been done in an adequate way here but it looks like there are promising avenues to pursue.

Problem 2. Cumming (2009, p. 22) states, 'The Raritan River is not obviously a Raritan (nor is it quite correct to say that it is called Raritan—it is called the Raritan!)'. As an objection to the metalinguistic analyses this could be construed as the complaint that it has proposed the wrong metalinguistic property, since 'the Space Needle' refers to the thing called 'the Space Needle', not the thing called 'Space Needle'.

Here I think the metalinguistic view has an adequate response. The response draws on an old distinction between bearing a name versus being referred to by a name made by Bach (1987) (see also Bach 1981), which has recently been given new life in terms of an analysis of appellative-'called' constructions (see Fara 2011 and Matushansky 2005). Here's how Fara puts it:

To be called Willard is to have 'Willard' as a name. To be called 'Willard' is for someone to address you or refer to you using that name. That is how the appellative-'called' construction works... You can be called Willard without being called 'Willard', and you can be called 'Willard' without being called Willard; you can have names that no one ever addresses you

²⁷ Thanks again to James Shaw for discussion here.

by, and you can be addressed by names other than your own. (Fara 2011, p. 493)

The metalinguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions should respond in a like manner: It's true that the Space Needle isn't called 'Space Needle' but it is called Space Needle—it is a bearer of 'Space Needle'—and the latter is all that has been claimed. Or in Bach's terminology we could say that the Space Needle bears the name 'Space Needle' but it isn't referred to by 'Space Needle'. Notice that there isn't a The Space Needle in Seattle and nothing in Seattle bears 'The Space Needle'; but there is a Space Needle in Seattle, which bears 'Space Needle'.²⁸

Problem 3. Given a capitalised description 'the Space Needle' or 'the Holy Roman Empire' is the meaning of the capitalised nominal---let's call these 'proper nominals'---compositionally determined? Matushansky (2008) provides a metalinguistic analysis of proper names whereby complex names such as 'Sherlock Holmes' have a compositional internal semantics. She provides an intersective semantics for 'Sherlock Holmes' such that to be a Sherlock Holmes one must be both a Sherlock and a Holmes. But some cases are more complicated, since e.g. it's true that the Rolling Stones are Stones, they aren't *Rolling* in any literal sense; and, likewise, the Space Needle is neither a Space nor a Needle (in a literal sense). Or to make the objection in terms of the distinction above: the Golden Gate Bridge is called Golden Gate, but its not called Golden nor is it called Gate—it bears 'Golden Gate'. To this problem Cumming (2009) suggest what I take to be the proper route.

It might be preferable, then, to treat the proper nominal as a semantic atom (with a metalinguistic interpretation), rather than attempting to distribute its meaning among its syntactic daughters. For instance, any object with the name *George Washington Bridge* would count as a George Washington Bridge. A Golden Gate Bridge would be something having the title *Golden Gate Bridge*. (Cumming 2009, p. 22)

This is progress, except I would amend the suggestion slightly. It seems that the relevant atom involved is 'Golden Gate', not 'Golden Gate Bridge', since as we've seen in such a phrase 'bridge' is semantically active and syntactically separable.

Problem 4. The metalinguistic analysis has an explanation for why 'the Holy Roman Empire' seems semantically nondescriptive in the sense that its referent needn't be holy. But even on the metalinguistic analysis capitalised descriptions are still descriptive in some sense—they describe their referent as being the unique thing that bears a certain name. The worry is that there are cases that call for a more strict form of semantic nondescriptiveness, i.e.

²⁸ Note that when a title begins with an article (e.g. 'The Office') it is natural, at least in speech, to drop an article when using the proper title would give you two articles in a row. But, as Ian Nance has reminded me, leaving the article in is acceptable. For example, 'the The Office episode' is passable (although a bit weird), whereas 'the The Space Needle elevator' can only be understood as a stutter. Or consider this: Q: 'Who is Apu?', A: 'He's a The Simpsons character'.

capitalised descriptions seem to be genuinely *rigid*, whereas definite descriptions are not.

The philosophical lore on definite descriptions and names has it that generally speaking definite descriptions allow for *de re/de dicto* ambiguities (also known as ‘scope ambiguities’). For example, a sentence such as

(28) The president might have been a Republican.

allows for both the *de dicto* reading (a) and the *de re* reading (b):

(a) $\text{Might}(\text{Republican}(\text{the president}))$

(b) $\lambda x[\text{Might}(\text{Republican}(x))](\text{the president})$

Whereas names, the lore continues, do not in general, allow for such ambiguities. For consider,

(29) Obama might have been a Republican.

Whether or not ‘Obama’ is given syntactic scope over the modal, the truth conditions are the same—that is we can’t hear a *de re/de dicto* ambiguity as we can with (28).

(a) $\text{Might}(\text{Republican}(\text{Obama}))$

(b) $\lambda x[\text{Might}(\text{Republican}(x))](\text{Obama})$

Thus, it seems that definite descriptions are generally nonrigid, in that they allow for narrow scope readings such as (28a), whereas proper names are generally rigid, in that they don’t allow for such narrow scope readings (Kripke 1980). But what about capitalised descriptions?

(30) Flight 175 could have crashed into the Space Needle.

It is very difficult to get the narrow scope reading of (30), where it is true just in case the following scenario is possible: Flight 175 doesn’t crash into a famous tower in Seattle but it does crash into the unique tower that bears the name ‘Space Needle’. But if ‘the Space Needle’ is analysed as a definite description equivalent to ‘the bearer of “Space Needle”’, the reading (according to the lore) should be available. If we substitute ‘the bearer of “Space Needle”’ for ‘the Space Needle’ is the narrow scope reading available?

(31) Flight 175 could have crashed into the bearer of ‘Space Needle’.

Perhaps it is easier to get the narrow scope reading here, but to my ear it is definitely not as clear of a case as, e.g. (28). Likewise consider the following pair:

(32a) Caesar might not have crossed the Rubicon.

(32b) Caesar might not have crossed the river named ‘Rubicon’.

It is difficult to get the *de dicto* readings where what is claimed to be possible is that some other river was the unique bearer of 'Rubicon' and Caesar did not cross it, although perhaps he did cross the shallow river in northeastern Italy. Again, it is perhaps easier to get the relevant reading with (32b).

A more difficult case for the metalinguistic analysis might be the following:

(33) The Holy Roman Empire might not have been the Holy Roman Empire.

(34) The Holy Roman Empire might not have been the bearer of 'Holy Roman Empire'.

It is more difficult to get a true reading of (33) than it is to get a true reading of (34)—though (34) is not completely natural.²⁹ But the metalinguistic analysis should have these coming out the same.³⁰

How can the advocate of the metalinguistic view of capitalised description respond? There is by now a vast literature on these types of problems as they arise for any view that claims that names are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions (see, e.g. Soames 2002, pp. 18-54). A certain subset of this literature is especially relevant for the current problem, namely the set of papers that deal with scopal problems as they arise for the metalinguistic analysis of names (see Bach 2002, Matushansky 2008, Rothschild 2007, and Fara 2015a).

The metalinguistic analysis of names is motivated by the observation that proper names can occur in syntactic predicate position (see Sloat 1969 and Burge 1973). Consider the following sentences with names in predicate position.

(35) The controversial Noam Chomsky delivered a lecture.

(36) An Alfred joined the club today. (Burge 1973)

Such examples suggest that the expressions that are traditionally called 'proper names' are, in fact, predicates for metalinguistic kinds. This view, in one form or another, has a reputable history of advocates, e.g. Kneale (1966), Sloat (1969), Burge (1973), Longobardi (1994), Geurts (1997), Bach (2002), Elugardo (2002), and has most recently been defended by Matushansky (2008), Izumi (2012), Fara (2015a), and Fara (2015b). The phenomena of *descriptions with grown capitals* and *names in predicate position* cohere very naturally and, in fact, both point to troubles with the old dogma that names are the analogs of constants in first-order logic.

But both the predicate view of names and the analysis of capitalised descriptions as metalinguistic descriptions face the modal scope problems outlined above. It is alleged that the metalinguistic account of names cannot

²⁹ Provided the right context perhaps a true reading of (34) is available. Consider: Had it not been for the addition of the term 'Holy' in certain 12th century documents, the Holy Roman Empire might not have been the Holy Roman Empire at all. The availability of this reading, however, seems to rely on a subtle change in intonation. A referee suggests a comparison with 'Had Samuel Clemens died in the Civil War, there would have been no Mark Twain'.

³⁰ Thanks to both Dilip Ninan and Ian Nance for discussion of this type of objection.

accommodate the data concerning modal embedding in a principled manner. If so, such an analysis should be rejected, and thus the metalinguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions should likewise be rejected. But if one of the predicative views on names can successfully accommodate (or explain away) the embedding data, then it seems that the metalinguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions could appeal to the same account. In other words, when it comes to the objection from modal embedding, the theses stand and fall together.

Does the predicate view of names have a satisfying account of the modal embedding data? Is it that ‘the Alfred’ is an incomplete description, or is it a ‘particularised’ description, or is that it contains a covert indexical, or what? We cannot not hope to settle this issue here.³¹

Nevertheless, even without settling that complicated issue, I think we have an interesting result: *the most promising analysis of capitalised descriptions confronts exactly the same hurdle as the predicate view of names*. Capitalised descriptions are, syntactically speaking, definite descriptions, which also systematically disallow narrow scope readings under modals. That is, a large class of noun phrases with internal syntactic complexity fronted by the definite article are also systematically rigid. Whatever theory explains this data could be employed in a defence of the view that names in argument position are predicates with covert or denuded determiners (in line with the accounts in, e.g., Matushansky 2008, Izumi 2012, or Fara 2015a³²). Without such a theory, however, the metalinguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions is incomplete.

Capitalised descriptions remain an anomaly—*not quite names, yet not quite descriptions*.

4. Conclusion

We’ve seen that syntactically, capitalised descriptions behave like definite noun phrases, and thus are not syntactically simple as the assimilation to names would seem to require. But semantically, capitalised descriptions behave in a peculiar manner for a definite description: they seem metalinguistic, their internal semantics is not straightforward, and most importantly they act like proper names in that they are rigid. Given this, capitalised descriptions are not semantically descriptive in the way we’d expect. A metalinguistic analysis is

³¹ Though a response that is particularly promising is one based on the account provided in Rothschild 2007. As applied to the metalinguistic analysis of capitalised descriptions we could speculate that there is something about capitalised descriptions such that they tend to be used as *particularised descriptions* instead of *role-type descriptions*. Support for this is found by noting that it is difficult to cook up natural scenarios where metalinguistic descriptions are role-like—such situations have to be quite unique.

³² Capitalised descriptions present an apparent counterexample to Fara’s (2015a, p. 109) syntactic generalisation that the (unstressed) definite article must be realised as \emptyset_{the} when it has a “name” as its sister. Doesn’t the definite article in ‘the Space Needle’ have a proper noun as a sister? It seems that in this case the definite article is indeed realised as unstressed, overt, and with a name as its sister. But of course this prompts the prior question: what notion of a “name” is operative in Fara’s syntactic generalisation? What notion of a “name” has it that the capitalised noun ‘Space Needle’ in ‘the Space Needle’ is not a “name”, while ‘Eva’ in ‘the ever-popular Eva’ is a “name”. Cases such as ‘the Space Needle’ (or ‘a Space Needle’ for that matter) just seem to be more cases where names occur in predicate position—so in line with The-Predicativism but nevertheless at odds with Fara’s “Where \emptyset_{the} ” rule.

initially promising but it only takes us so far, and runs headlong into the issues that plague the metalinguistic views of names.

Given this what should we ultimately say about capitalised descriptions? Are they names or definite descriptions? This prompts a prior question: What does it even mean to say the capitalised descriptions are ‘names’? One common way to distinguish proper names from other noun phrases is to say that proper names are singular terms that lack syntactic structure. If so, then for the reasons provided in this paper capitalised descriptions are decidedly *not* proper names. But I suspect that for many theorists the linguistic category ‘proper name’ is not a syntactic or grammatical category *per se*. It is instead a quasi-semantic category that picks up on features like arbitrary assignment of referent, rigidity, and semantic simplicity (see, e.g., Soames 2002, p. 53). If this is the criterion then perhaps capitalised descriptions could count as ‘names’ in that sense—although their syntactic complexity suggests some corresponding semantic complexity. In either case, it seems that the traditional distinction between proper names and definite descriptions is under threat. Do some proper names begin with a semantically active definite article? Do some proper names have a complex internal semantics? Are some rigid definite descriptions proper names? Are some syntactically complex definite descriptions nevertheless ‘tags’?

At this point one might demur on the grounds that according to the traditional taxonomy, there is an important linguistic distinction between ‘proper names’ and ‘definite descriptions’; or between proper nouns and common nouns. But the analysis of capitalised descriptions suggests that this distinction is a philosophical myth that does not hold to sustained scrutiny. One might conclude therefore, that this traditional taxonomy must be rejected. But whether or not we draw such a grand conclusion (along the lines of Coates 2006), we still have not ultimately solved the puzzle concerning descriptions which have grown capital letters.

What should we say about this ubiquitous yet hitherto theoretically neglected form of expression, which is syntactically on a par with definite descriptions yet at the same time semantically on a par with names? What explains the fact that a certain subclass of definite descriptions, namely the ones that have grown capital letters, systematically disallow narrow scope readings under modals? An answer to this puzzle may shed light on the semantic and syntactic properties of their lower-case and ‘the’-less cousins.

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